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# Rewarding mobility? Towards a realistic European policy agenda for academics at risk



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## Abstract

This article maps from a critical and comparative perspective how scholars at risk are currently being integrated into the European research infrastructure, as well as in various EU and non-EU Member States. The focus is on three countries ranging from older to newer EU members to one non-EU member state—Hungary, Romania and the United Kingdom—as well as on EU-level organisations. We draw on twelve in-depth interviews conducted with key stakeholders involved in the process of academic migration (non-governmental organisations, EU and national level actors) to identify key issues concerning academics at risk. Finally, we call for a robust EU-level response to an issue that is currently inadequately addressed by national governments, professional associations and NGOs. As we argue, the focus on mobility as a factor supporting research excellence in the regular European research infrastructure can have negative unintended outcomes for scholars at risk. For many of them, rewarding mobility can entail the threat of losing their legal status in temporary places of migration. What is needed is a nuanced approach for scholars at risk in a diverse range of situations, which should involve closer cooperation between international academic bodies and EU policy makers, and complement support for those who need to escape to third countries with the offer of remote work in the country where they are able to obtain a secure residence permit.

**Keywords:** Academics at risk, Authoritarianism, Academic policy, Asylum, European reform, Academic mobility, Knowledge exchange, Exile, Migration

## Introduction

Mobility has been a central characteristic of European scholarly lives since the Middle Ages. The notion that mobility contributes to academic success, as measured by outcomes such as full-time employment or career advancement in national higher education institutions, especially early in one's career, has become a basic assumption (Welch, 1997, 330; Mamiseshvili, 2010; Ivancheva & Gourova, 2011; Jacob & Meek, 2013; OECD, 2013; van der Wende, 2015; Israel & Cohen, 2022; Krannich & Hunger, 2022; Euraxess 2022; EUA 2019). In this article, we present a critical and comparative perspective on the way the positive reinforcement of mobility affects academics at risk in the EU and its

neighbourhood (for the framework in question, cf. e.g. Marie Skłodowska Curie actions, Erasmus actions).

As scholars have begun to point out, historically, conditions such as political persecution and forced displacement had a diverse range of consequences for academics as well as societies at large, including negative effects, such as precarious employment for the displaced, brain drain for their countries of origin, and a closing in of academic inquiry as a result of isolation and censorship (Beatson & Zimmermann, 2004; Björklund & Tuori, 2019; Crawford et al., 2017; Gusejnova, 2020; Gusejnova & Bourke, 2020; Kmak, 2019; Obermayer, 2014; Abu-Assab, 2017). In particular, living under conditions of war or persecution imposes restrictions on mobility and leads to temporary as well as long-term adjustments to conditions of censorship and repression (Migration data portal, 2022).

The criterion of mobility as a dimension of excellence defined by terms such as internationalisation has attracted criticism even in the cases where academic careers were not affected by risks from authoritarian regimes and wars (cf. European Charter for Researchers, 2005; Morano-Foadi, 2005). For instance, concerns have been raised about issues such as gender equality and mobility opportunities, especially given the unfair advantage that the emphasis on mobility gives to candidates with the 'best' citizenship index or gendered position within a relationship in earlier career stages (Ackers, 2008; Schaer et al. 2017; Avellis & Didenkulova, 2016; Băluță, et al., 2012; Jöns, 2011; Scott Cohen, 2020; Winslow, 2016; Appelt, et al. 2015). Others have noted that mobility as a whole has become a self-affirming discourse (Bauder, 2015). Under conditions of enforced exile, the imposition of mobility as an enabling factor for excellence adds a further burden. By rewarding mobility, many academic support schemes push scholars at risk to the limits of their legal status as temporary migrants in third states.

Just as supporting academic careers in times of peace builds on the blueprint of mobility, it would seem, so enabling mobility is often presented as the main solution to supporting scholars at risk from war and persecution (Cf. Fermi and Immigrants 1968; Bailyn and Fleming, 1969; Baker and Zeiliger, 2019). Today's academics who leave their countries to escape humiliation, trials or house arrest, or who lead a precarious existence in their current places of work, fall under two provisions: that for 'regular' academic mobility and exchange, and that for asylum-seeking non-academics. Asylum procedures tie at risk academics to a destination in a way that is usually directly harmful to their academic careers. While they may gain personal security, their careers are even more disrupted. In terms of integrating vulnerable academics, the EU and the UK face cumulative challenges from migration resulting from wars in the Middle East, Afghanistan and now Ukraine (Bergan et al., 2020; Bubbers, 2015; CARE, 2016; Dogan & Selenica, 2020; Etkind, Rutten et al., 2021; European University Association, 2015; Poleschuk, 2021), the sharp rise in academic persecution in Russia and Belarus (European Union, Council Directive 20 01/55/ EC of 20 July 2001; European Council Recommendation 2021/22; Feischmidt et al., 2019), as well as from the erosion of democracy in EU states (Koper & Mohamadhossen, 2020; Petö, 2020 and 2021). In this context, with few exceptions, research on academic expulsion continues to be dominated by works on World War I or World War II, which concentrate on the immediate support of flight from the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied

Europe to the United States as a response to risk from totalitarianism and war. Other relevant work focuses on refugee integration in general, a broad field in which the particular circumstances of academic communities are difficult to address (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2017; Kmak, 2019, 2015 and 2014). In contemporary interdisciplinary scholarship, the field of academic refugee and integration studies has been revitalised by an analogous connection to this past experience in the wake of the 2015 crisis and the plight of refugees from the Middle East and, since 2021 and 2002, Afghanistan and Ukraine. In this context, the EU continues to be seen primarily as a destination and safe haven for academic exiles. We believe that this pattern of interpretation itself needs to be problematised. In particular, much more work needs to be done on the way academics at risk are subsequently being integrated or deployed in host societies, particularly in Europe.

Our research, funded and supported by CIVICA (The European University of Social Sciences), aims to support and strengthen the ways in which the EU and individual European countries might respond to at risk academics today (For reference on existing policy objectives, see, for example, European Commission 2019). Migrant academics are a distinct group for us because they are treated as such by some—though not all—national migration regimes. In calling for a more realistic policy regarding scholars at risk, we draw attention to the need for a closer look at the risks actually experienced by academics who seek to develop their careers in EU countries more generally. Currently the vast majority of studies regarding academics at risk or forced mobility assume that academics at risk come from non-EU countries and choose western EU countries as a destination. By including Romania, we are assessing one newer EU Member State as a place of mass influx for scholars at risk. Furthermore, by looking at Hungary, we are touching on the ambivalent role of an EU country that is both a place of destination for scholars at risk from countries affected by wars, such as Russia's war against Ukraine, and a place where higher education institutions are under threat from illiberal regimes within the EU itself, such as Hungary's own illiberal state. In choosing the UK as one of our case studies, we took account of the current state of the EU, threatened by processes not only of migration but also of dramatic internal transformation and political instability, looking at its research infrastructure as a result of political processes such as Brexit, and at its political structure as a union of states which share democratic and liberal values.

Since the end of the Cold War, the flow of academic refugees to the EU has increased not only from regions ravaged by civil wars and international interventions outside Europe, but also from parts of Europe (EU and non-EU) where authoritarian regimes have emerged. Most worryingly, the EU itself has been affected by the erosion of democracy, as seen in countries such as Hungary (Pető, 2020) and Romania (Dragolea, 2022). In the EU, threats against science are part of the wider spectrum of attacks in countries where democracy is under pressure. In this regard, linking the deterioration of democracy and democratic institutions and practises to academic resistance and repression requires expanding the limiting framework of academic free speech or even autonomy to an examination of the larger context of democratic erosion in the EU (Bergan et al., 2020). This area of suppression of academic freedoms within the EU and the resulting migrations has received comparatively little attention, with some notable exceptions (Pető 2020; 2021).